News in focus

DREW ANGERER/*NYT*/REDUX/EYEVINE

Marcia McNutt, president of the US National Academy of Sciences, says that the academy hasn't received any requests to expel members.

THE US NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES CAN NOW KICK OUT HARASSERS. SO WHY HASN'T IT?

The academy told *Nature* that no one has used the complaint system put in place last year, even though several academy members are known sexual harassers.

By Giuliana Viglione

Last year, the US National Academy of Sciences (NAS) voted overwhelmingly to amend its by-laws so that it could expel members for harassment or other types of misconduct. Nearly 16 months later, no one has been ousted and no one has used the new system to report known harassers within the NAS's membership, *Nature* has learnt.

Marcia McNutt, president of the NAS, confirmed that although the academy has reviewed two or three reports of other types of misconduct since amending its by-laws, it has not received any reports concerning harassers.

That's not because the NAS's membership is free of harassers. Still among its members are astronomer Geoffrey Marcy and evolutionary geneticist Francisco Ayala, who resigned from their universities in 2015 and 2018, respectively, following findings of sexual harassment, and electrical engineer Sergio Verdú, who was dismissed from Princeton University in New Jersey in 2018 for violating its policy prohibiting consensual relations with students.

"We know that there are several NAS members for which there is good documentation of violation of our code of conduct," says McNutt.

After the by-laws were changed last year, McNutt feared that the NAS would be inundated with requests to investigate members. "And in fact the opposite has happened," she says. "It's been practically radio silence."

Several other prominent scientific bodies have instituted similar policies in recent years. In 2018, the governing council of the American Association for the Advancement of Science voted unanimously to adopt a policy for removing known harassers from its fellows. And other professional societies have established processes for revoking fellowships and awards in cases of misconduct.

Filing a complaint

Under the NAS's new policy, anyone – whether they are a member of the academy or not – can bring a complaint, McNutt says. When this

occurs, the appropriate secretary — the home secretary when an NAS member is accused, and the foreign secretary when a member without US citizenship is accused — would examine the evidence presented as part of the complaint. If incidents being reported seem to violate the NAS code of conduct, the secretary appoints a committee, which then gathers statements from the complainant and the accused, allows each to respond, and makes a recommendation on what disciplinary measures the NAS should take.

The NAS does not have the resources to conduct its own formal investigations, unless the complaint that's been filed is about internal NAS matters, according to McNutt. So the policy stipulates that complaints must be based on public documentation of resolved cases investigated elsewhere, such as a university report detailing harassing behaviour or a statement that a professor has been dismissed for violating an ethics policy.

The change to the NAS's by-laws, announced in early June 2019, came amid renewed scrutiny of sexual harassment at professional institutions as part of the #MeToo movement. Before the change, the academy had no mechanism for removing members. Even a 1997 prison sentence for child molestation did not prompt the NAS to oust physician Daniel Gajdusek from its ranks. He was still a member when he died in 2008.

A prestigious award

Eighty-four per cent of the NAS's membership ultimately voted to adopt the new policy, which required only a simple majority to pass. "I was very happy to see the vote come out as it did," says Meg Urry, an astrophysicist at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, who became an NAS member in 2016. Urry has long spoken out against sexual harassment in academia.

Election to the NAS — a lifetime appointment — is often considered one of the highest honours a US scientist can receive. But membership of the academy isn't just a line in a scientist's awards list: the academy takes an active role in advising the federal government on scientific issues, so members are often recruited to serve on panels. The National Academies Press publishes more than 200 reports each year that weigh in on issues such as the implications of climate change and equitable vaccine distribution.

It is problematic for someone who has committed sexual harassment to have such an influential, national role, says Kathleen Treseder, an ecologist at the University of California, Irvine. Treseder was one of four women at the university who filed sexual-harassment complaints against Ayala in November 2017.

Membership of the academy is a signal that, by some measure, a person is a great scientist. But mentoring young people and fostering their growth as scholars is also part of being a great scientist, Urry says, and that's why harassers should not be allowed to stay. "It's not just that you've done something bad, it's that you've poisoned the well."

Radio silence

Why no one has used the new NAS system to file a harassment complaint is an open question. One possibility is that the NAS has not properly communicated its new policy and process for reporting harassers to its members and to the wider community. "As far as I understand it, the process hasn't been finalized," Urry told *Nature* when contacted about this issue.

Bill Kearney, a spokesperson for the NAS, says that the change to the policy was widely covered in the media last year and was disseminated to the NAS's members.

Some might also question why the NAS leadership can't proactively move known harassers into the queue for consideration by a committee, even if no individual has filed a complaint. McNutt cannot, because under the policy, she would be the arbiter if there were an appeal, presenting a conflict of interest. As for other members of the NAS's governing council or leadership, Kearney confirmed that they could bring forward complaints so long as they excused themselves from the rest of the proceedings.

And those who have already reported harassers to other organizations might be feeling fatigue. "Do I have to do everything? I've already sacrificed enough," Treseder says about why she hasn't filed a complaint with the NAS. "Everybody else has this information. Somebody else could do it." She adds: "I could not be more disappointed in the National Academy of Sciences as an institution and every single National Academy of Sciences member who has allowed the sexual harassers to stay."

McNutt says that the NAS members who are known harassers have been keeping a low profile since the by-laws changed. "They are not being appointed to committees or panels or anything like that," she says. "Their influence in the academy is non-existent."

Jane Willenbring, a geologist at Stanford University in California, who successfully pushed the Geological Society of America to institute a similar policy after someone who harassed her was named a fellow of the organization in 2017, says that these scientists' lack of participation in academy activities is not enough. Their continued presence as members — even inactive ones — sends a signal that "we don't have to take an active role in telling harassers that they have no place in science", she says. "I don't think that's a healthy way to create the important change that we need to see."

CONCERNS INTENSIFY OVER UPCOMING COVID-VACCINE RESULTS

Jabs now in trials could stumble on safety, be subject to political interference or fail to meet expectations.

By Smriti Mallapaty & Heidi Ledford

Several ongoing coronavirus-vaccine trials could announce game-changing results next month. But as anticipation grows, concerns are building about whether the vaccines will clear safety trials, what they will achieve if they do and the risk that the approval process will be influenced by politics, or at least seem to be.

Three weeks ago, the UK trial of a leading vaccine candidate developed by the University of Oxford and pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca restarted after a six-day pause to investigate safety concerns. Halted trials of the same vaccine in South Africa and Brazil have also since resumed, but the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has not yet given the green light for US studies to start again. The trials' sponsors have so far released few details about what caused the pause. Some scientists say this lack of transparency could erode public trust in the vaccine.

In the background, fears have intensified that political meddling could see a vaccine approved for emergency use without sufficient evidence that it works. US President Donald Trump has said he wants a vaccine ahead of his country's presidential election in November.

To assuage concerns, the drug companies behind the three leading coronavirus vaccines in phase III trials — AstraZeneca, Pfizer and Moderna — have released documents describing how their tests are being conducted. These trial protocols include benchmarks for safety and success, and details that had not been made public before, including how soon the vaccines' preliminary results could be reported and how the companies might stop